

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 452

CE 081 877

AUTHOR Swanson, Richard A.  
TITLE The Theory Challenge Facing Human Resource Development Profession. Innovative Session 8. [AHRD Conference, 2001].  
PUB DATE 2001-00-00  
NOTE 8p.; In: Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) Conference Proceedings (Tulsa, Oklahoma, February 28-March 4, 2001). Volumes 1 and 2; see CE 081 829.  
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; \*Economics; Human Resources; \*Labor Force Development; \*Psychology; Research; \*Systems Approach; \*Theories; \*Theory Practice Relationship  
IDENTIFIERS \*Theory Development

## ABSTRACT

The human resource development (HRD) profession needs to continue to develop its core theories and to understand that theory building is a scholarly process. Theoretical constraints affecting HRD are that HRD is a relatively young academic field of study and that most academic fields are applied and draw upon multiple theories in articulating their disciplinary base. Presently, there is no universal view or agreement on the theory or multiple theories that support HRD as a discipline. HRD is being asked to contribute more and to provide reliable results--HRD is being viewed as too important and central to host organizations to tolerate atheoretical explanations of what it can do for its sponsors. For this reason, a discrete and logical set of theories as the foundation of HRD has been proposed. It is comprised of psychological theory, economic theory, and systems theory. (Contains 34 references.) (YLB)

The Theory Challenge Facing  
Human Resource Development Profession.  
Innovative Session 8

Richard A. Swanson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION  
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
- ☐ Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND  
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS  
BEEN GRANTED BY

Swanson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

## The Theory Challenge Facing Human Resource Development Profession

Richard A. Swanson  
University of Minnesota

*A theory simply explains what a phenomenon is and how it works" (Torraco, 1997). The HRD profession needs to continue to develop its core theories and to understand that theory building is a scholarly process. This paper presents three arguments: (1) that the demand for HRD theory is increasing, (2) that the present available HRD theory has taken us about as far as we can go, and (3) that what we do is too important to wallow in atheoretical explanations.*

Keywords: Theory, HRD Theory, Research in HRD

*"There is nothing so practical as good theory."--Kurt Lewin*

Kurt Lewin, the famous early organization development innovator and scholar, presented a profound explanation of theory apart from popular perceptions. He noted that there is nothing so practical as good theory. This is in contrast to commonly held thoughts of theory being "half-baked" ideas disconnected from the "real world." A good theory is something that is thorough and that has been tested both intellectually and in practice. Lewin helps us from misusing the word "theory."

### Importance of Theory

The HRD profession needs to continue to develop its core theories and to understand that theory building is a scholarly process. Here are a few organizing thoughts about theory. These ideas are important to highlight because there are those in HRD that do not believe that having HRD theory or clearly specifying the underlying theory of HRD is essential to the profession (McLean, 1998). An interpretation of this minimal view of theory is that the profession needs to have an ethical intent and to situationally draw upon as many theories as required in pursuit of its work. Theory is particularly important to a discipline that is emerging and growing. Sound theory is not pontificating or forcefully marketing the latest fad. Rhetoric that negates theory, or the promotion of the idea that theory is disconnected from practice, is an artifact of non-theoretical thinking. Rather, theory in an applied field such as HRD, is required to be both scholarly in itself and validated in practice, and can be the basis of significant advances.

### Definition of Theory

The following two definitions of theory from HRD scholars capture the essence of theory and the theory challenge facing our profession:

- "A theory simply explains what a phenomenon is and how it works." (Torraco, 1997, p. 115). Torraco's definition poses the following question: What is HRD and how does it work?
- "Theory building is the process or recurring cycle by which coherent descriptions, explanations, and representations of observed or experienced phenomena are generated, verified, and refined." (Lynham, 2000). Lynham's definition poses the following question: What commitments must individuals, the HRD profession, and its infrastructure make in order to establish and sustain theory building research in the HRD profession?

### Theory Building Research

The arena of theory building research can be thought of as a never-ending journey for any discipline. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that there are points in the maturation of an field of study that press theory building research to the forefront. I contend (1) that the demand for HRD theory is increasing, (2) that our present available theory has taken us about as far as we can go, and (3) that what we do is too important to wallow in atheoretical explanations.

Copyright © 2001 Richard A. Swanson

## Recognizing the Theory Building Journey as Scholarship

When a scholar takes a serious look at the theory building research journey, it is quite intricate. This journey is overviewed in a recent article titled "Theory Building in the HRD Profession" (Lynham, 2000). Lynham's article is a useful starting point for those interested in HRD theory building discussions or actual theory building research.

Theory-practice publications such as "Workplace Learning: Debating the Five Critical Questions of Theory and Practice" by Rowden (Ed.) (1996) and "Systems Theory Applied to Human Resource Development" by Gradous (Ed.) (1989) have also provided excellent contributions to the theory in HRD. Gradous' (1989) classic monograph uses systems theory as a springboard for thinking about the theory of HRD and arguments for and against a unifying theory in HRD. The range of perspectives in the monograph call for focusing on system outputs (being results-driven versus activity-driven) (Dahl, 1989) to the consideration of the additional theories of field and intervention theory, theory of work design, critical theory, and human capital theory (Watkins, 1989). The idea of multiple theories that pay attention to people, organizational viability, along with a systematic and systemic understanding of the context emerged in this monograph. These ideas emerge in most theoretical debates about HRD.

Serious theory building methodologies (Reynolds, 1971; Dubin, 1978; and Cohen, 1991) are challenging. Even the comparatively simple theory building tools and methods put forward represent significant effort to the theory builder (e.g. Patterson, 1983; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The HRD profession must allow, respect, and encourage a full continuum of theory engagement. For example, seemingly elementary investigations into definitions and documenting the range of ideas within a realm of HRD are fundamentally important theory-building stepping stones. Examples include "Operational Definitions of Expertise and Competence" (Herling, 2000), "Commonly Held Theories of Human Resource Development" (Weinberger, 1990), and "An Overview of Organization Development Definitions" (Egan, 2000). On the philosophical side, an example of theory is "Core Beliefs Underlying the Profession of Human Resource Development" (Ruona, 1999), a study that investigates the thought and value systems that permeate the discipline of HRD. Other writings, such as "Philosophical Foundations of HRD Practice" edited by Ruona and Roth (2000) exposes core values in the field and "Theoretical Assumptions Underlying the Performance Paradigm of Human Resource Development" by Holton (in-press), pushes to articulate the underlying assumptions related to one of the major schools of thought in HRD. All add to our understanding of the HRD phenomenon.

Examples of straightforward theory building efforts on the part of HRD scholars include "Systems Theory Applied to Human Resource Development" (Jacobs, 1989), "Foundations of Performance Improvement and Implications for Practice" (Swanson, 1999), "A Theory of Intellectual Capital" (Harris, 2000), "A Theory of Knowledge Management" (Torraco, 2000), and "A Theory of Responsible Leadership for Performance" (Lynham, 2000). Each one of these cited pieces deserves forums where there is opportunity for additional reflection in an effort to advance the profession. The behavior of the profession has been to largely overlook the substantive theory work done within the profession and to outside the profession for theories from related disciplines.

## Requirements of a Sound Theory

Critics of HRD have chided the large number of HRD practitioners and commercial HRD products as being atheoretical (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996; Holton, 1996; Swanson, 1996). Atheoretical means there is no thorough scholarly or scientific basis for the ideas and products being promoted. Organizations seeking quick or magical solutions are vulnerable to the exaggerated promises of suppliers. Patterson (1983) has provided a criteria for assessing the theory that undergirds sound practice. It is as follows: (1) Importance, (2) Preciseness and clarity, (3) Parsimony and simplicity, (4) Comprehensiveness, (5) Operationality, (6) Empirical validity or verifiability, (7) Fruitfulness, and (8) Practicality.

Reflective practitioners and scholars need to know about the completeness and integrity of ideas they are being asked to adopt. Certainly, there are always new ideas and those ideas generally deserve to be tried and tested. The ethical problem arises when unjustified claims are made in an attempt to market these ideas before they are fully developed and assessed. At minimum, the HRD profession should expect old and new ideas to be put to theoretical soundness tests such as Patterson's.

## Theoretical Constraints Impacting HRD

There is tension in the academic world about the distinction between *disciplines* and *fields* of study. The academic debates around academic "turf" contain a number of issues. First, HRD is a relatively young academic field of study and is still maturing. Furthermore, the stage of maturation of HRD varies within nations and between nations.

Second, most academic fields of study are applied (e.g., medicine, engineering, education, business, and communication) and draw upon *multiple theories* in articulating their *disciplinary* base. Also, it is common for applied disciplines to create specializations that in time come to overshadow their hosts and to break away as independent disciplines. For example, university departments of adult education and vocational education have historically supported HRD in the United States. Many HRD programs have become larger than their adult education and vocational education academic university hosts in the last decade of the 1900s. Another point to recognize is that most disciplines are rooted in a set of theories and at times those theories are shared by other disciplines.

These academic issues confuse the HRD theory discussion. For example, there are HRD programs hosted in colleges of the arts, engineering, business, and education that draw upon some aspect of psychological theory. What slice of psychological theory and for what purpose is what ultimately defines the discipline. For example, HRD is believed to be committed to learning, helping people improve, and for organizations to improve their performance these considerations and this suggests focus in choosing and picking core psychological theories for the purpose of defining the theory of HRD. Thoughtfully identifying core component theories for the articulation of a particular discipline is essential for advancing its academic status. *Furthermore, the blending of the selected core theories for the purpose of the discipline provides the true distinguishing theoretical base of a discipline.*

Take two examples of theories often identified as foundational to HRD—systems and anthropological theories. Systems theory is not as value-laden as anthropology. Anthropologists are generally committed to not disturbing or changing the culture it studies. In contrast, systems theory almost always is thinking about understanding the system and the potential of improving it. Thus, it can be paradoxical to have HRD people espouse anthropological views with the intent to change the culture. This is a simple illustration of the missing logic that can occur when theory building is bypassed. Given the nature and purpose of HRD, easy arguments can be made that systems theory is core to HRD and anthropology is secondary. Anthropology will likely provide situational methods and tools to be called upon as needed while never being central to the theory and practice of HRD. A second example within HRD is to look closely at HRD professionals claiming a “whole systems view” (of the world, the organization, and the people in it) without them having the systems theory and tools to match those claims. It appears as though the following simpleton strategy is adequate for many of these practitioners in their belief that all the questions, data, and answers are within the affected people and that putting them into a guided group process is all that is required to be support sound HRD practice. Such a view would limit group interaction facilitation as “the” skill of the HRD professional.

### Theory of HRD

Presently there is no universal view or agreement on the theory or multiple theories that support HRD as a discipline. Furthermore, there are limited theory alternatives being visibly proposed in the literature and being debated by the profession. On one hand some have called for systems theory to serve as a unifying theory for HRD to access all useful theories as required (Gradous, 1989; Jacobs, 1989) and on the other hand many have proposed sets of principles in the forms of comparative lists of added value, products, processes, and expertise (Brethower, 1995) or challenging the profession to consider the additional theories of field and intervention theory, theory of work design, critical theory, and human capital theory (Watkins, 1989).

The alternative to having a sound theoretical and disciplinary base for the HRD profession is the present state of rudderless random activity aggressively sponsored by atheoretical professional associations and greedy consultants (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996; Swanson, 1997). This condition celebrates short-term perceptions of success without having deep understanding or the ability to replicate results. The present dominant thinking in HRD to call upon the theories or theories required for each situation. This has taken the profession about as far as it can go. It regularly puts the decision-maker back on the ground floor with little opportunity for maturing theoretical discussions or advancement.

HRD is being asked to contribute more and to provide reliable results— HRD is being viewed as too important and to central to host organizations to tolerate atheoretical explanations of what it can do for its sponsors. For this reason, a discrete and logical set of theories as the foundation of HRD has been proposed. It is comprised of psychological theory, economic theory, and systems theory (Passmore, 1997; Swanson, 1995, 1999; Swanson & Holton, 2001). Economic theory is recognized as a primary along with its survival metrics at the organizational level; systems theory recognizes purpose, pieces, and relationships that can maximize or strangle systems and sub-systems; and psychological theory acknowledges human beings as brokers of productivity along with their cultural and behavioral nuances. It is believed that these three theories-- more than any others-- make up the theory of HRD, respond to the realities of practice, and that each is unique, robust, and complimentary to each other. Thus, the integration of the three theories is at the core of the discipline of HRD and ethics plays an important moderating role.

## Conclusion

If theory just happened as a result of practice, the HRD theory bucket would be overflowing. On the average, HRD practice does not come close to what we know from sound theory. Systematically filling the HRD theory-practice void is fundamental to the maturation of the profession and it is the work of both practitioners and scholars. In conclusion, I contend (1) that the demand for HRD theory is increasing, (2) that our present available theory has taken us about as far as we can go, and (3) that what we do is too important to wallow in atheoretical explanations.

The purpose of this paper was to present a broad overview of the state of theory and theory building research in HRD. In doing so, it serves as a preamble for focusing on the theory challenges facing HRD. The following challenges have been selected for further exploration in the subsequent AHRD symposium:

- Metaphors for thinking About HRD Theory
- The Challenge of Conducting Theory Building Research
- International Challenge to HRD Theory
- The Theory Journal Challenge Facing HRD
- Issues and Actions Related to the Theory Challenge Facing HRD

## Presenters/Panelists

*Richard A. Swanson, University of Minnesota (session chair)*  
*Elwood F. Holton, III, Louisiana State University*  
*Susan L. Lynham, Texas A & M University*  
*Wim Nijhof, University of Twente*  
*Richard J. Torraco, University of Nebraska*  
*Turnbull, Sharon, Lancaster University*  
*Karen L. Watkins, University of Georgia*

## Session Description

The HRD profession is actively engaged in discussion focused on the nature of and role of theory in the profession. This session explores the theory challenge from five unique perspectives and allows participants to actively engage in analyzing the next steps in the theory challenge facing HRD.

### Purpose

The purpose of this symposium is to advance the theory discussion in the HRD scholarly community and to focus on the specific theory challenges facing the profession.

### Goals

The goal of this session is two-fold: (1) to expand the HRD theory interest group within AHRD and (2) to push the theory challenge facing HRD into an agenda for action. One formal paper is presented that culminates with the theory challenges addressed by symposium presenters.

### Content

#### The Theory Challenge Facing HRD

*Richard A. Swanson, University of Minnesota*  
*"A scholarly perspective on the theory challenge facing HRD."*

#### Metaphors for thinking About HRD Theory

*Karen L. Watkins, University of Georgia*  
*"Alternative metaphors for thinking about the theory challenge facing HRD."*

#### The Challenge of Conducting Theory Building Research

*Susan L. Lynham, Louisiana State University*  
*"Theory building research methods for meeting the theory challenge facing HRD."*

#### International Challenge to HRD Theory

*Wim Nijhof, University of Twente*  
*"International factors impacting the theory challenge facing HRD"*



The Theory Journal Challenge Facing HRD

Elwood F. Holton, III. Louisiana State University

Richard J. Torraco, University of Nebraska

*"A theory journal as a means of addressing the theory challenge facing HRD."*

Issues and Actions Related to the Theory Challenge Facing HRD

Sharon Turnbull, Lancaster University

*"Participant analysis of the next steps in the theory challenge facing HRD."*

#### Format/Style

The format will include: (1) an overview of the innovative session paper (15 minutes), (2) four "perspective" presentations by a diverse group of leading scholars (15 minutes each; 1-page handouts for each), and (3) a facilitated group analysis of the theory challenge facing HRD with a summary of issues and actions (90+ minutes).

#### References

- Brethower, D. M. (1995). Specifying a human performance technology knowledge base. Performance Improvement Quarterly, 8(2) 17-39.
- Cohen, B. P. (1991). Developing sociological knowledge: Theory and method (2nd ed.). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Dahl, H. J. (1989). Human resource development needs a unifying theory. In D. B. Gradous (Ed.), System's theory applied to human resource development (pp. 7-19). Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.
- Dubin, R. (1978). Theory building (Revised ed.). New York: Free Press.
- Egan, T. M. (2000). An overview of organization development definitions: Ten dependent variables. University of Minnesota Human Resource Development Research Center. St. Paul, MN
- Gradous, D. B. (Ed.) (1989). System's theory applied to human resource development. Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.
- Harris, L. (2000). A theory of intellectual capital. In R. W. Herling & J. Provo (Eds.), Strategic perspectives on knowledge, competence, and expertise (pp. 22-37). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Hearn, G. (1958). Theory building in social work. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Herling, R. W. (2000). Operational definitions of expertise and competence. In R. W. Herling & J. Provo (Eds.), Strategic perspectives on knowledge, competence, and expertise (pp. 8-21). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Holton, E. F. (1996). The flawed 4-level evaluation model. Human Resource Development Quarterly.
- Holton, E. F. (in-press). Theoretical assumptions underlying the performance paradigm of human resource development. Human Resource Development International.
- Jacobs, R. L. (1989). Systems theory applied to human resource development. In D. Gradous (Ed.), System's theory applied to human resource development (pp. 27-60). Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.
- Lynham, S. A. (2000). Theory building in the HRD profession. Human Resource Development Quarterly.
- Lynham, S. (2000). The development and validation of a model of responsible leadership for performance. University of Minnesota Human Resource Development Research Center. St. Paul, MN.
- McLean, G. N. (1998). HRD: A three-legged stool, an octopus, or a centipede. Human Resource Development International, 1, 375-377.
- Micklethwait, J., & Wooldridge, A. (1996). The witch doctors: Making sense of the management gurus. New York: Times Books
- Patterson, C. H. (1983). Theories of counseling and psychotherapy. Chicago: University of Chicago Free Press.
- Patterson, C. H. (1986). Theory of counseling and psychotherapy (4th Ed). New York: HarperCollins.
- Passmore, D. L. (1997). Ways of seeing: disciplinary bases of research in HRD. In R. Swanson & E. Holton (Eds.), Human Resource Development Research Handbook (pp. 114-137). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Reynolds, P. D. (1971). A primer in theory construction. New York: Macmillan.
- Rowden, R. W. (Ed.) (1996). Workplace learning: Debating five critical questions of theory and practice. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ruona, W. E. A. (1999). An investigation into the core beliefs underlying the profession of human resource development. University of Minnesota Human Resource Development Research Center. St. Paul, MN.
- Ruona, W. E. A. & Roth, G. (Eds.) (2000). Philosophical foundations of human resource development practice. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Ruona, W., & Swanson, R. A. (1998). Theoretical foundation of human resource development. In R. Miller

(Ed.), Human Resource Development. University Council for Research in Vocational Education.

Strauss, & Corbin (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Swanson, R. A. (1995). Human resource development: Performance is the key. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 6, 207-213.

Swanson, R. A. (1996). In praise of the dependent variable. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 7, 203-207.

Swanson, R. A. (1997). TADDS short (Theory application deficit disorder). Human Resource Development Quarterly, 8, 2xx-2xx.

Swanson, R. A. (1999). Foundations of performance improvement and implications for practice. In R. Torraco (Ed.), Performance improvement theory and practice (pp.1-25). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Swanson, R. A., & Holton, E. F. (2001). Foundations of human resource development. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Torraco, R. J. (1997). Theory building research methods. In R. A. Swanson & E. F. Holton (Eds.) Human resource development research handbook: Linking research and practice (pp. 114-137). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Torraco, R. J. (2000). A theory of knowledge management. In R. W. Herling & J. Provo (Eds.), Strategic perspectives on knowledge, competence, and expertise (pp. 38-62). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Watkins, K. E. (1989). Five metaphors: Alternative theories for human resource development. In D. B. Grados (Ed.) (1989). System's theory applied to human resource development (pp. 167-184). Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.

Weinberger, L. (1998). Commonly held theories of human resource development. Human Resource Development International, 1, 75-93.



# ACADEMY OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT 2001 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

I-8

## Manuscript Release Form

**THIS FORM MUST BE COMPLETED AND RETURNED WITH EACH MANUSCRIPT.  
ONLY ONE AUTHOR IS REQUIRED TO SIGN THE FORM**

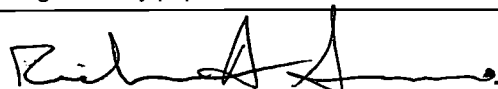
<b><u>Paper Title</u></b>	The Theory Challenge Facing Human Resource Development		
<b><u>Author Names</u></b>	Richard A. Swanson		
<b><u>AHRD Reference #</u></b>	Innovative 008		
Please tell us where to communicate with you about this paper			
<b><u>Contact person</u></b>	Richard A. Swanson		
<b><u>Address</u></b>	University of Minnesota Human Resource Development 1954 Buford Avenue Suite 425 St. Paul MN 55108 USA		
<b><u>Office Phone</u></b>	(651)292-0448	<b><u>Office Fax</u></b>	(651)292-0448
<b><u>E-mail</u></b>	raswanson@uswest.net		

We are adding a topical index for the proceedings this year. Please list three key words that describe the primary topics of your paper. Examples might include teams, evaluation, diversity, performance measurement methods, etc. Choose words that will be of the greatest help to your colleagues when they search for research on a topic.

<b><u>Key word 1</u></b>	HRD Theory
<b><u>Key word 2</u></b>	Theory Building
<b><u>Key word 3</u></b>	Importance of Theory

The Proceedings will be submitted to ERIC after the conference. The Academy requires your signature to include your paper in the Proceedings.

I agree to allow Oscar A. Aliaga, editor of the 2001 Academy of Human Resource Development Proceedings, to submit the proceedings with my paper included to the ERIC database. By signing this I am releasing the paper for all authors of the paper.



**Richard A. Swanson Signature**

**March 30, 2001**

**DATE**